

## "Believers don't do politics": the practices of Soviet madrasa students and Soviet cultural policy in the Middle East, 1955-1991

Khalilova, Zilola

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Arbeitspapier / working paper

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Khalilova, Z. (2021). *"Believers don't do politics": the practices of Soviet madrasa students and Soviet cultural policy in the Middle East, 1955-1991*. (ZMO Working Papers, 27). Berlin: Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO). <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:101:1-2021021817272180261624>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

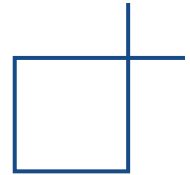
Dieser Text wird unter einer Deposit-Lizenz (Keine Weiterverbreitung - keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under Deposit Licence (No Redistribution - no modifications). We grant a non-exclusive, non-transferable, individual and limited right to using this document. This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.



## "Believers don't do politics":\* The practices of Soviet madrasa students and Soviet cultural policy in the Middle East, 1955–1991

Zilola Khalilova, Al-Beruni Institute of Oriental Studies, Tashkent

### Abstract<sup>1</sup>

In 1943, the Soviet government decided to reverse its policy towards religious communities with the purpose of building alliances during the Second World War. With regard to Islam, it arranged for the establishment of a Central Asian Spiritual Administration of Muslims (SADUM) in Tashkent.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, the state used SADUM to establish cultural diplomatic ties with some Middle Eastern countries by sending students of Soviet-based religious schools – the Madrasas Mir-i Arab (1946–1991), Baraqqhan (1956–1961) and the Tashkent Islam Institute, Oliy Ma'had, (1971–1991) – to study and gain experience in Islamic universities of the Middle East, notably Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Morocco, Jordan, and Syria, between 1955–1991. The main aim of this essay is to study the exchange experiences of these Soviet madrasa students in Middle Eastern countries and the ways this exchange became part of Soviet foreign policy. Studying the foreign madrasa education of these Soviet students, their student life abroad, and their activity, will shed some new light on religious policy in the Soviet period. The analysis of the activities of these students is based on their correspondence. Specifically, I argue that these exchanges helped the Soviet Union to strengthen its ties with foreign academic institutions and Muslims in those countries. Strategically, it was to contribute to strengthening Soviet influence in the Middle East which played an important role in its global and regional political calculations. Here, I distinguish between the intended and unintended consequences of those foreign connections. Although the Party and government viewed this activity in primarily instrumental terms, I suggest that the students used the opportunities to exchange ideas with their foreign interlocutors, which also had its own impact on religious discourse and practice upon their return to Central Asia.

\* This is a remark by the head of SADUM's International Department, Yusufkhan Shokirov, during an interview he gave to a correspondent of the French newspaper *Le Monde*. See the official statement of Shokirov, 1978, Tashkent, TsGARUz (Central State archives of Uzbekistan), f.2456, op.1, d.601, 16–17.

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Katrin Bromber, Eren Tasar, Akram Khabibulayev, Kyara Klausmann and the editors and anonymous reviewers of the ZMO Working Papers series at Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin for their invaluable help in improving this article. This research was supported by a grant from ZMO.

<sup>2</sup> Sredneaziatskoye duxovnoye upravleniye musulman.

**Keywords:** *Mir-i Arab Madrasa, Tashkent Islam Institute, Middle East, Soviet Islam, correspondence, Muslim students*

### Introduction

The history of international relations of the Soviet state, and in particular its policy in the Middle East and attitudes towards Islam, have been covered in numerous studies.<sup>3</sup> However, Soviet madrasa students travelling to foreign Islamic universities have received less much attention so far, as the significance of these exchanges for Soviet international relations remains unexplored and unacknowledged.

In this essay, we will fill this gap by introducing the institutions of Islamic learning in Soviet Uzbekistan and then discussing the history of the foreign study experiences of Soviet Muslims who were trained at Islamic Universities in Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Jordan, and Morocco between 1955 and 1990.

A small but growing body of scholarship has focused on exchanges between Soviet Muslims and Middle Eastern countries.<sup>4</sup> Different aspects of Islamic education in Central Asia have already been discussed by many researchers.<sup>5</sup> Although these exchanges have been categorized as a subset of Soviet foreign policy, or as an aspect of the intellectual history of Central Asian Islam, the content and individual aspect of Muslim students' exchange with Middle Eastern countries, and its role

<sup>3</sup> See, Marilyn Bechtel. *The USSR and the countries of Africa and Asia*, in *Nations & peoples: The Soviet Experience*, ed. by Marilyn Bechtel and Daniel Rosenberg. New York: NWR publications, 1984, 175–188; Eren Tasar. *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> James Pickett. *Soviet Civilization through a Persian Lens: Iranian Intellectuals, Cultural Diplomacy and Socialist Modernity 1941–55*, *Iranian Studies*, 2015, 48 (5), 805–826; Jeff Eden, Paolo Sartori. "Moving Beyond Modernism: Rethinking Cultural Change in Muslim Eurasia (19th–20th Centuries)", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59, 2016, 1–36; *Empire, Islam, and Politics in Central Eurasia*, ed. by Uyama Tomohiko. Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Ashirbek Muminov, Uygun Gafurov, Rinat Shigabiddinov. "Islamic Education in Soviet and post Soviet Uzbekistan", in *Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and its Successor States*, ed. by Michael Kemper, Raoul Motika and Stefan Reichmuth. London, New York: Routledge, 2010, 223–280; Anke von Kügelgen. "Moral Education in Central Asia, 19th–21st Centuries: The Foundations for Sufi, Jadid, Soviet, National, and Islamist Ethics", in *The Piety of Learning. Islamic Studies in Honor of Stefan Reichmuth*, ed. by Michael Kemper, Ralf Elger. Brill, 2017, 76–104.

in broader cultural processes has yet to be studied in depth.

In general, the scholarship on Islam in Soviet Central Asia has not prioritized Muslim exchanges as an independent topic. It has, understandably, focused instead on developing an understanding of the basic institutions and policies toward Islam under communism.<sup>6</sup> My research is heavily indebted to this new literature, which proves that the Islamic sphere under communism in spite of state and party control was marked by a high degree of dynamism and internal debate. This more recent literature has supplanted an older body of scholarship that, for the most part, did not rest on close engagement with primary sources. Using these advances as a basis, I want to delve deeper into an important and hitherto unexplored aspect of Muslim activity in Soviet Central Asia.

My analysis of the activities of Muslim students who studied in Islamic universities in the second half of the twentieth century in Uzbekistan rests on documents from the Central State archives of Uzbekistan and the archive of the Uzbekistan Muslim Board. It aims to contextualize and provide further details about Islamic education in the Soviet Union by examining the engagements of Islamic leaders and Muslim students who studied abroad. This will hopefully contribute to the understanding of the relationship between Islamic education and the state – from the perspective of the Union government in Moscow, and the Uzbek government in Tashkent. I build on a recent paper that suggests that Soviet international diplomacy created an opening for some Muslims to advance their own interests and develop further the existing institutions of Islamic education. In this context, I seek to take a closer look at the position of Soviet religious scholars (ulema) on the international stage. Finally, I want to understand how Central Asian Muslims who studied abroad articulated their Sovietness and Muslimness, and how these ideas were impacted by their encounter with the Middle East. Furthermore, in order to have a full understanding of Islamic education, I will cover the organization of this educational system, its curricula, the literature used in class, the tutors and stipends, and the relations with students in Middle Eastern institutions and their activities.

An additional new element of my study concerns the students themselves. Prior scholarship has only in very rare cases described these students as complex individuals. What can historians learn from the personal lives, religious practices, spirituality, and morality of these Muslim students who were placed in the remarkable position of having to represent an atheist, communist society in Islamic universities in the Middle East? Through interviews and a review of private correspondence and family papers, it is possible to build a thorough picture of the topics these students were exposed

to, the friendships they developed in Arab countries, and the ways in which they understood Soviet, Central Asian, and Uzbek identity. Taking a closer look at these individuals promises not only to provide a more nuanced picture of Soviet Islam, but also of the role of religion in people's lives in the Soviet Union.

To understand the situation in the field of Islamic education and practice we should begin with a brief overview of the past, answering the following question: What are the contours of the traditions of Islamic learning in contemporary Central Asia? Here we will focus on the traditions of Islamic learning and the relationship between the state and Islam in the Soviet Union.

The second part of this paper introduces the international interactions of Soviet Muslims even though they were living in a closed society. Based on our examinations of archival data and the results of field research we focus on the relationship between Islam and state in the USSR, highlighting the following questions: Why did the Soviet government, while claiming to strengthen atheism, send cadres of Muslims to study abroad as part of a special mission? How did the Soviet state open access to studying Islamic knowledge abroad against the background of a closed society, and how did Central Asian Muslims use this opportunity for their own benefit? In this context, we will also have a look at the position of Soviet ulema on the international stage. How did the Soviet state choose the countries and universities for students to study abroad?

The Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with Arab countries during the "Cold War", to demonstrate its "religious freedom" to the world. After the Second World War, it allowed the re-opening of three religious schools, the Mir-i Arab Madrasa, and the Tashkent Islamic Institute.<sup>7</sup> This process became entangled with Soviet foreign policy and diplomacy both in terms of propagating Soviet policies internationally and supporting relations with Muslim countries; within this connection we will analyse the possibilities of advanced training of madrasa students at foreign Islamic universities in the Middle East.

It is remarkable that the Soviet state came to promote students studying abroad to demonstrate the "religious freedom" of the Muslim population and strengthen its ties with the Middle East. To achieve its goals, the state and the Communist Party made compromises with religious institutions. This agreement had "mutual benefits": the Soviet government, by establishing the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia, pursued its specific goals, and the Islamic clergy sought to preserve the Islamic religion and enjoyed contact with foreign Muslims. In this political game, Soviet madrasa students participated actively, remained loyal to the government, and informed the relevant state organs of the nature of their correspondence. At the same time, those religious studies also helped strengthen religious knowledge in Muslim communities in the Soviet Union thereby strengthening their religious identity. I argue

6 B. Babadjanov, Paolo Sartori. "U istokov sovet'skogo diskursa o 'xorošhem islame' v Tsentral'noy Azii, *Ab Imperio*, 3, 2018, 219–255; H. Yul'doshxujayev, I. Kayumova. *Uzbekiston ulamolari*. Movaroun-nahr: Toshkent, 2015; Eren Tasar. "The Official Madrasas of Soviet Uzbekistan", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 59, 2016, 265–302.

7 Eren Tasar. "The Official Madrasas of Soviet Uzbekistan", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 59, 2016, 265–302.

that this version of Soviet patriotism became a secular concept where atheist political identities and religious devotion could co-exist.

Building on these arguments, the third part of this paper analyses the activity of madrasa students abroad as part of Soviet diplomacy. Besides that, we tried to find answers to such questions as: Is there any relationship between the concepts of being religious or being Soviet abroad? How did student mobilization help to develop Soviet Muslim networks with other Muslims? How did madrasa students perceive nakaz instruction for correcting foreign relations?

We argue that SADUM's educational institutions promoted the formation of loyal Muslim cadres of Soviet imams, who acquired a high degree of political sensitivity together with profound religious credentials. Being a Muslim student in the context of the antireligious landscape of Soviet politics was not enough, and required the student to convincingly display patriotism and obey the internal control and discipline of madrasa life. The routine of students in the madrasa was strictly regulated, and authorities tried to systematically control the learning process, internal order, and even the mood of the students.<sup>8</sup> A key intention of this regulation was to instil in students a Soviet way of life that would enable them to put their loyalty and piety on display when some of them had a chance to study in Arab countries. The state also viewed students' experiences as a unique source of information on these countries' internal dynamics, one that other Soviet institutions could not duplicate, which made it also of interest to Soviet intelligence agencies.

Beyond the realm of politics, this paper investigates the activities and the social life of Muslim students studying abroad. In this regard, the fourth part is based on the correspondence of madrasa students, and analyses Soviet Muslim networks. We argue that Soviet students established meaningful relationships with ulema abroad, and acquired knowledge that enabled them to pursue careers as prominent ulema and Islamic scholars abroad. This analysis seeks to frame Soviet students' experiences in Arab madrasas in a broader sociological and cultural framework that goes beyond the standard narrative of instrumentalization and state politics that has dominated academic analyses of the topic until now.

### The tradition of Islamic learning, the state, and challenges in Soviet Uzbekistan

The Hanafi branch of Sunni Islam determined the high position of Muslim clergy, which has become an important component of the social structure of Central Asian society. Passing from generation to generation, Islam became a part of the cultural heritage of the Central Asian people acquiring specific social, political, cultural, and aesthetic functions. On the other hand, religion had a ritual and traditional character, regulating all aspects of the everyday life of the population. The pursuit of 'ilm, or knowledge, has always been an

important symbolic and practical component of the ulema's social role. The hadith justifies this by saying: "Striving for knowledge is the duty of every Muslim man and every Muslim woman." The tradition of learning through traveling to the Middle East was observed mostly in the context of commercial journeys and Hajj pilgrimage. During these trips in the 19th century, travellers witnessed changes in the education system towards modernity in the universities of Egypt and Turkey.<sup>9</sup> They saw new teaching methods in Islamic institutions, which intellectuals of Central Asia who travelled to Europe and the Ottoman Empire attempted to inculcate at home.<sup>10</sup> These modernist intellectuals integrated modern "new method" teaching in the schools that they established in the last quarter of the 19th century. As a result, a new Muslim modernist group, al-jadidiya, appeared, which used the new methods in Islamic education (e.g., new method schools, Rushdiya madrasas, Muslim universities).<sup>11</sup> At the initiative of these intellectuals, a charitable society was created encouraging Muslim students to study at the universities of the Russian Empire, Germany, France, and at modern Islamic universities in Turkey.<sup>12</sup>

Starting in 1927, the government repressed progressive intellectuals, restricted the work of societies sending students abroad, exposed traditional ulema to persecution, and declared religious books reactionary. Religious and historic buildings on the territory of Uzbekistan were turned into residential houses, barns, storage depots, and houses of Soviet culture. Madrasas and mosques were demolished, while the surviving buildings were turned into museums, prisons, warehouses, dormitories, clubs, etc. Similar government policies against Islam and Islamic education were enforced in other republics of the Union, which had large Muslim populations.<sup>13</sup>

9 Modernization in the area of civil education began with the foundation of the first modern civil schools in Istanbul in 1838–1839, later called Riishdiye Mektepleri. In contrast to traditional educational institutions, these schools were established to impart pragmatic-utilitarian knowledge. For further elaboration see, Selçuk Akşin Somel. "Ottoman Islamic education in the Balkans in the nineteenth century", *Islamic Studies*, 36 (2/3), special issue on Islam in the Balkans, Summer/Autumn 1997, 443–444.

10 Thomas Kuttner. "Russian Jadidism and the Islamic World: Ismail Gasprinskii in Cairo, 1908. A Call to the Arabs for the Rejuvenation of the Islamic", *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*, 16 (3/4), 1975, 383–424.

11 M. Mobin Shorish. "Back to Jadidism: the future of education in Central Asia" *Islamic Studies*, 33 (2/3), special issue on Central Asia (Summer–Autumn 1994), 161–182; Suchandana Chatterjee. "Modernizing education in Central Asia: limitation of Jadidism in the Emirate of Bukhara", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 61, Part Two: Millennium (2000–2001), 1125–1135; Adeeb Khalid. "A Secular Islam: Nation, State, and Religion in Uzbekistan", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 35 (4), 2003, 573–598.

12 Dov B. Yaroshevski. "Bukharan Students in Germany, 1922–1925", *Bamberger Zentralasienstudien, Konferenzakten ESCAS IV*, Bamberg 8.–12. Oktober 1991, ed. by I. Baldauf, M. Friederich. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1994, 271–277.

13 D. Usmanova, I. Minnulin, R. Mukhametshin. "Islamic Education in Soviet and Post-Soviet Tatarstan", in *Islamic Education in the Soviet*

8 TsGARUz (Central State archives of Uzbekistan), f. P–2456, op.1, d.198, 3.

However, during the Second World War, with the purpose of ensuring the political and financial stability of the government, the state made concessions in its position vis-à-vis religion, which led to a softening of certain aspects of the religious sphere.<sup>14</sup> The state found itself considerably softening its rhetoric, even praising religion tacitly. In this process, the state was forced to open a second line behind the front to provide spiritual and material support to the army and the nation during the war years, to increase people's confidence in victory.<sup>15</sup>

This context helps explain Stalin's order allowed the opening of religious centres in several cities of the Soviet Union in 1942–1943.<sup>16</sup> The government established the following institutions for the religious leadership: the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the European part of the USSR and Siberia (DUMES), the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the North Caucasus (DUMSK), the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Transcaucasia (DUMZAK) and the Central Asian muftiate, SADUM. These muftiates were, nominally, self-governing, centralized religious organizations. The Soviet state's policies toward these institutions featured significant shifts in the early communist period, from flexibility after 1917, to progressive hostility across the 1920s, to a resumption of some normalcy during the war. In this sense, encouraging cooperation with Muslim institutions in left-leaning Arab countries was a partial return to the legacy of pragmatic ideological alliance-making that took shape directly after the October revolution.

On October 20, 1943 with the efforts of ulema Ishan Babakhan ibn Abdulmashidkhan,<sup>17</sup> the Spiritual Administration (SADUM) began its official activity. From 1957–1982 it was headed by Ishan Babakhan's son, Ziyaiddin Babakhanov,<sup>18</sup> who was succeeded from

1982–1989 by his son Shamsuddin, Babakhanov,<sup>19</sup> who was in turn succeeded from 1989–1993 by SADUM's last mufti and its only leader to not come from the Babakhanov family, Muhammad Sadyk Muhammad Yusuf.<sup>20</sup>

SADUM's activities played an active role in fostering the rebirth of Islamic traditions in the cultural and educational life of Muslims in the region. For example, the Koran was published in 1957, 1960, 1968, and 1985.<sup>21</sup> The collections of Hadith by Imam al-Bukhari, At-Tirmidhi,<sup>22</sup> as well as the books *Historical Monuments of Uzbekistan, Islam and Muslims in the land of Soviets*<sup>23</sup> and the *Muslims of the East* magazine were issued.<sup>24</sup> In addition, in following years, the documentary films "Islam and the USSR", "Monuments of Islam in the USSR" were created. However, it should be noted that these events were not intended for the cultural and educational needs of Muslims, but to show that in the countries of the Soviet Union Muslims have freedom of conscience. The German news journal *Der Spiegel*, and German news agency *Reuters*, as well as popular magazines published in the United States commonly stated, as part of their Cold War propaganda, that the Soviet government did not give their Muslim minority the freedom to practice as Muslims. Therefore, it was important for the Soviet Union to show publicly that their Muslims subjects were free.

The prohibition and pressure of the Soviet system influenced the internal and external activities of the Spiritual Administration. Within this process, one of the important events in the life of Muslims was the official permission given for Islamic institution's educational activities under the Spiritual Administration in Tashkent, such as the Mir-i Arab Madrasa in Bukhara (which operated from 1946–1991), the Barakhan Madrasa (which functioned from 1956–1961) in Tashkent, and the Tashkent Islamic Institute (in operation since 1971 and hereafter, TII). In the period between 1943 and 1991, Islamic authority was able to contribute to the recovery of Islamic values in the region. An analysis of information from archival sources shows that the number of students in madrasas and the TII was limited, the educational process was under strict supervision, all activities of these institutions were under strict super-

*Union and its Successor States*, op.cit., 21–67; A. Bogomolov, S. Danylov. "Islamic Education in Ukraine", in *Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and its Successor States*, op.cit., 67–107.

14 A. Bennigsen (co-authorship Ch. Lemerrier-Quelquejay). *Islam in the Soviet Union*. New York: Praeger, 1967; Harry Lipset. "Education of Moslems in Tsarist and Soviet Russia", *Comparative Education Review*, 12 (3), October 1968, 310–322; Khalid Adeeb. *Islam after Communism. Religion and Politics in Central Asia*. London, 2007, 78.

15 *Islam and the Soviet State (1944–1990): Documents*, Vol. 3, collected, introduced and commented by Dmitry Yu. Arapov. M.: Izd.dom Mardjani, 2011, 14–17; A. Bennigsen. "Islam in the Soviet Union", *Journal of the South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, 115–133.

16 Roi Ya. *Islam in the Soviet Union. From the Second World War to Gorbachev*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000; Devin DeWeese. "Islam and Soviet Legacy of Sovietology: A Review essay on Yaacov Roi's Islam in Soviet Union", *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 13 (3), 2002, 298–330.

17 Babaxanovi. *Islam na territorii bivshey Rossiyskoy imperii, Ensiklopedicheskii slovar*, Vipusk 4, Moskva: Vostochnaya literatura, 2003, 12–14.

18 Boboxonov Sh. *Sunmas ziyo. Shayx Ziyovuddinon hazratlarining hayot va faoliyatlari*. Toshkent, Ma'naviyat, 1998; "Shayx Ziyovuddinon ibn Eshon Boboxon", *Zamonamiz ulamolari*, Imom al-Buxoriy xalqaro jamgarmasi. Z.Munavvarov tahr. Toshkent, 2001, 6–26.

19 Usmonxo'jayev A. "Shamsiddinxon Boboxonov ibratlari", *Hidoyat*, 4, 2012, 22–23; *Daryodil alloma*. Risola, Toshkent, G'afurG'ulom-nashriyoti, 2017, 149–150.

20 Shayx Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf. *Islam na territorii bivshey Rossiyskoy imperii, Ensiklopedicheskii slovar*, Vipusk 4, Moskva: Vostochnaya literatura, 2003, 53–55.

21 *Islam na territorii bivshey Rossiyskoy imperii, Ensiklopedicheskii slovar*, Vipusk 4, Moskva: Vostochnaya literatura, 2003.

22 TsGARUz f. P–2456, op.1, d.613, 1–2.

23 Babaxanov Z. *Islam I musulmane v strane sovetov*. Moskva: Progress, 1980.

24 The journal published from 1967 by the name *Musul'mane Sovetskogo Vostoka* (Muslims of the Soviet East) in English, Arabic, Uzbek, Russian and French. See TsGARUz f. P–2456, op.1, d.595, 78.



vision,<sup>25</sup> which was made manifest in learning activities, the limits of the number of students and teachers, and the entire educational process. The leadership of the Spiritual Administration actively participated in the organization of educational activities of religious educational institutions. All these measures contributed to the formation of Islamic culture and spiritual education that were characteristic of its time.

### Open access in a closed society:

#### The international contacts of Soviet Muslims

The position of the Soviet Union in the Middle East was based on the strengthening of economic trade ties, and the development of political relations through this activity. This region was of special significance due to its rich natural resources and the strategic significance of the Black Sea Straits and Suez Canal. Decolonization after World War II created an opportunity for the USSR to successfully promote socialism and anticolonial nationalism in the region's newly independent nations. Initially, at least, the political situation favoured Soviet penetration into the region. In the 1950s many Middle Eastern countries refused to join the pro-Western military blocs and actively sought alternative allies.

Thus, the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with Egypt (1943) Iraq, Syria, Libya (1944), Libya (1955), Morocco (1958), Tunisia (1960), Jordan, Kuwait, Sudan, Mauritania, Somalia, and the United Arab Emirates (1971).<sup>26</sup>

These diplomatic relations played an important role in the creation of international relations between the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, and those of Eastern countries, which were established directly relations by the Soviet Union. It should be noted that although four official Islamic religious centres were opened in the Soviet Union, the main priority in international relations was given to SADUM, an outcome attributable to its administrative control over important historical sites and shrines.<sup>27</sup>

As noted, the Soviet government set a goal to demonstrate, especially in the Arab world, "religious freedom" to Muslim peoples. For example, on February 1958 the Letter from the chair of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, A.A. Puzin, wrote to the CPSU Central Committee:

The reactionary circles of the United States, Britain and other countries made extensive use of religious organizations and their leaders to strengthen and expand their influence in foreign countries, and especially in the countries of the East. They actively use these organizations also for the purpose of anti-Soviet propaganda. Religious organizations of the USSR can, to a certain extent, counteract this propaganda and, for their part, cause a lot of trouble to reactionary circles of foreign countries. Moreover, with the skilful direction of their activities, the religious organizations of the USSR can become one of the effective channels of Soviet influence in the countries of the East and in some other foreign countries. However, this channel of our penetration abroad has so far been underestimated and poorly employed.<sup>28</sup>

In this process, the reasoning went, the Soviet state could use religion and its representatives for its own interests. The Russian political scientist V.A. Akhmadullin comments that the foreign policy of the Soviet government promoted an international Soviet Muslim presence abroad, and also raised the authority of the state to demonstrate how Muslim values are maintained in a "democratic" society.<sup>29</sup>

In this fashion, SADUM's international relations began in 1961 with the creation of its Department of Foreign Relations. The main goal of this department was to establish friendly relations with various Muslim organizations and promote the achievements of the Soviet state in a short time. The department also participated in regular correspondence with various Islamic leaders in foreign countries, and actively engaged in the publication and exchange of delegates. SADUM established diplomatic relations with more than 70 countries in the period from 1950–1970.<sup>30</sup> Most of them were Arab countries (Egypt, Morocco, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Syria, Sudan, Libya, Algeria, etc.).

Taking into account the role and influence of Islamic scholars, the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (known as the Council for Religious Affairs after 1967) commissioned the visits by Al-Azhar University's Rector Dr. Muhammad Mohammed Al-Fahhom, the General Secretary of the Academy of Islamic Studies in Egypt Mohammed Bisar, the President of the Association of Young Muslims in Egypt Dr. Ibrahim at-Tahawi, the main Lebanese Mufti Sheikh Hassan Khaled, the Syrian Mufti Sheikh Ahmed Kufitari, and by Sheikh Ahmad Barkash and others.<sup>31</sup> From 1962–1972, Muslim delegations visited the Muslim communities of the USSR at the invitation of the four muftiates.<sup>32</sup> During these visits, the Spiritual Administration demonstrated the short-

<sup>25</sup> In 1944, the Council for Religious Affairs was established within the USSR Council of Ministers (since 1965, the Council for Religious Affairs). Along with this, by decision of the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR dated May 20, 1944 and the Council of People's Commissars of the UzSSR dated May 9, 1944, the Representative Office of the Council for Religious Affairs was established in the republic. *Islam and the Soviet State (1944–1990): Documents*, Vol. 3, op.cit., 14–17.

<sup>26</sup> Masha Kirasirova. "Sons of Muslims in Moscow: Soviet Central Asian Mediators to the Foreign East, 1955–62", *Ab Imperio* 4, 2011, 106–132; Marilyn Bechtel. "The USSR and the countries of Africa and Asia", op.cit., 175–188.

<sup>27</sup> The main reason of such kind priority describes that the huge percent of Muslims live in Central Asia and the main historical and Islamic art buildings situated in Central Asia.

<sup>28</sup> *Islam and the Soviet State (1944–1990): Documents*, Vol. 3, op.cit., 114–116.

<sup>29</sup> Akhmadullin V.A. "Islamskiy faktor vo vneshney politike Soyuza sovetskikh respublik", *Forumi Rossiyskix musulman*. Ejegodno nauchno analiticheskiy byulleten 3/DUMNO, N.Novgorod: Medina, 2007, 81.

<sup>30</sup> TsGARUz f. r–2456, op.1, d.654, 61–62. R not P.

<sup>31</sup> TsGARUz f. P–2456, op.1, d.544, 45; d.672,119.

<sup>32</sup> TsGARUz f. P–2456, op.1, d.537, 47.

term achievements of the Soviet state, the activities of the population, the practice of religious freedom, and the conditions created by the state for Muslims.

At the initiative of SADUM, a number of international conferences on Islamic issues were held in Muslim cities. These conferences were aimed not only at promoting the development of scientific and cultural ties, but also at showing the life of Muslims of the country in order to promote socialism. For example, the "Muslim Conference of the USSR" was held in Tashkent on November 13–14, 1973; a conference dedicated to the 30th anniversary of SADUM was held on October 5–7, 1976, and the Conference on Religious Leaders was organized in Moscow on June 6–10, 1977 with the theme of "Peaceful, disarmament and the establishment of just relations among nations." In 1979 in Dushanbe, the International Islamic Forum entitled "The Contribution of Muslims to Central Asia, Volga region and the Caucasus", and in 1986 an international conference was held in Baku "Muslims on the Road to Peace."<sup>33</sup>

One of the most important and contested issues in the activities of religious administration in the years 1943–1991 was the training of religious personnel that was given special attention. These educational institutions were able to train Islamic religious leaders in a society with limited religious conviction within the complex and controversial regime of 1945–1991.

The exchange was not one way. Many foreign Muslims felt they were helping their "little brothers" in the Soviet Union. At first, in 1948, Z. Babakhanov, the head mufti of SADUM from 1957–1982, had the opportunity to improve his skills at Al-Azhar University. After that, the establishment of relations with Egypt made it possible to accept a group of Muslim students. On August 24, 1957, Mustafa Sbair, head of the Department of Foreign Students at the University of Damascus in Syria, sent a letter to the spiritual department asking to accept a group of Muslim students from the Soviet Union to establish friendly relations and attached the required documents.<sup>34</sup>

In March 1969, during the visit of the delegation led by Ismail Makhdum Sattiev the issue of student's exchange and further development of relations with Al-Azhar University was discussed.<sup>35</sup> In the course of further contacts, the Minister of Education of Syria, Mustafa Hoddod, stated that the contract on the exchange of students from the USSR was signed and that 10 students could be accommodated within it. If it were necessary, the correspondence explained, then 2–3 more places for Soviet students would be added.<sup>36</sup> In 1969 during the visit of Z. Babakhanov to Morocco and Algeria, the delegation of Soviet Muslims visited Al-Qarawiyyin University in Fez and asked

the rector of the university to provide a place for students from the Soviet Union; a positive agreement was reached.<sup>37</sup>

In 1969 during the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Jordan Abdullah Gosha to Tashkent, the SADUM leaders offered to exchange students. As a result of the support of the delegation of Jordan, scientific cooperation was established.<sup>38</sup>

In December 1977, Shayh Muhammad Ali al-Harakan from the World Islamic League of Saudi Arabia sent a letter to the Director of Mir-i Arab Madrasa and SADUM about the admission of students to the University of Medina,<sup>39</sup> and the Spiritual Administration and madrasa staff received offers on behalf of General Secretary Ali Muhammad Mukhtar from the World Islamic League (Mecca, SA), which granted five scholarships for Mir-i Arab Madrasa and TII graduates from the World Islamic League to transfer their knowledge into Islamic universities in Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, and which also asked them to send the names of the candidates and the chosen Islamic universities.<sup>40</sup>

Following up on the previous relations, on November 19, 1982, Mahmoud Ahamad al-Kuftar, the head of the Sharia faculty of the Damascus Islamic University in Syria, said that the students of the madrasa in Tashkent and Bukhara were given five places to continue their education of sharia, adding that: "This will be a small donation for our brother Muslims."<sup>41</sup>

In Rabat, the head of the Association of Islamic Universities in Morocco, Muhammad al-Fasi, awarded Soviet students two places to study at the Islamic University named after Mohammed bin Saud in Riyadh,<sup>42</sup> while in 1983, the head of the visiting the delegation of Jordan Dr. Abdulaziz Hayat said that he would accept students from the Soviet Union in any number. He referred not only to the Sharia Faculty, but also to other faculties of the university. He noted that 70% of the students at the Islamic University of Jordan were women. Thus, he continued, not only men but also women from the Soviet Union could study at the school, adding that they were provided with separate sleeping quarters.<sup>43</sup>

As a result, a group of Muslim students selected by SADUM was able to use this opportunity to study religious knowledge and skills at Al-Azhar University in Egypt, at the Damascus Islamic University in Syria, at Al-Qarawiyyin University in Morocco, at the Islamic University of Jordan, at the University of Benghazi in Libya, and at the Omdurman University of Sudan.

So, initially, 3 Soviet students were officially sent to Al-

<sup>33</sup> TsGARUz, f. P–2456, op.1, d.590, 101–122.

<sup>34</sup> TsGARUz f. P–2456, op.1, d.213, 384.

<sup>35</sup> TsGARUz, f. P–2456, op.1, d.503, 31.

<sup>36</sup> TsGARUz f. P–2456, op.1, d.509, 61.

<sup>37</sup> TsGARUz f. P–2456, op.1, d.503, 19.

<sup>38</sup> TsGARUz f. P–2456, op.1, d.672, 77.

<sup>39</sup> TsGARUz f. P–2456, op.1, d.599, 293.

<sup>40</sup> TsGARUz f. P–2456, op.1, d.629, 25.

<sup>41</sup> TsGARUz f. P–2456, op.1, d.659, 215.

<sup>42</sup> TsGARUz f. P–2456, op.1, d.587, 181.

<sup>43</sup> TsGARUz f. P–2456, op.1, d.672, 119–120.

Azhar University in 1955, and in the following years the number of students studying abroad increased. From 1956 to 1960 the number increased to 10, and from 1961–1985 more than 20 students were sent to study at foreign universities. Each student was under the strict control of Soviet law enforcement agencies and tried to maintain the prestige of the Soviet state at the international level.

### **Dramas of nationhood in the correspondence:**

#### **The political mission of Soviet students**

The opportunity to study abroad was given to Soviet Muslim students after each student was selected through a special examination and interview. In the archives of madrasas and the Islamic Institute in Tashkent there is a profile of every student sent abroad. These documents are characterized by information about the person, their autobiography, their attitude to public policy, their ability to fulfil religious obligations, their knowledge of religious sciences, their level of reading the Koran, their behaviour and speech, as well as their ability to speak Arabic. And, of course, every student sent to study abroad was provided with a special notice that they held special significance as representatives of the state.<sup>44</sup>

For example, on September 14, 1955, the instruction for students departing to Al-Azhar University in Egypt given by the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults noted:

When traveling to Egypt to receive higher Muslim education at a university in Cairo, Muslim students should simultaneously remember their high rank as a citizen of a Soviet country and the obligations that this title places on them, and be guided in all their actions and statements abroad by considerations of the national interests of the motherland, not allowing the commission of acts that could reduce their dignity as Soviet citizens. Muslim students from the Soviet Union should strive to do everything possible to dispel any misconceptions of their co-religionists abroad about the status of the religion of Islam and the life of Muslims in the Soviet Union. Muslim students should talk to students and clergymen from other countries about the achievements of the Soviet people in the fields of economics, culture and science, about those huge changes that occurred in the life of Muslims in the Soviet Union, about the friendship of the peoples of the Soviet Union...If any foreigners voice any negative remarks against the Soviet people, the Soviet government or the state of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, it is necessary to give a prompt reply, in appropriate form, to these individuals. Of all the statements made to students in Egypt hostile to the Soviet Union, the latter should at the first opportunity inform the Soviet Embassy in Cairo with a request for advice and recommendations.<sup>45</sup>

These instructions underscored the fact that students were aware that their activities were being monitored, and their correspondence with SADUM leaders, ma-

drasa directors, and family members was under the control of Soviet intelligence agencies. They provided a great deal of information about the structure of Islamic educational institutions abroad, about the learning process and its organization, problems, and shortcomings, about textbooks, student dormitories, and student relations, and about the attitude of foreign universities to Uzbek students. In addition, they were asked to describe similarities and differences between Islamic education in the USSR and Islamic education in their host countries. The students understood that if they failed to provide the requested information, they might not be selected to study in subsequent years in a madrasa. Nevertheless, the letters cannot be read as purely formulaic documents. The students provide sincere reactions to what they viewed as drawbacks in the system. Studying the students' correspondence gives us information about the educational system in Arab countries in that period. I have consulted 40 letters from students concerning overseas education and about 20 letters between SADUM and staff members of Islamic universities in the Middle East; to my knowledge, this correspondence has never been examined or cited before.

Of particular note are the letters' references to shortcomings in overseas education. They include factual and statistical information about Arab countries in that period. For instance, an Uzbek madrasa student who studied in Al-Azhar University in Egypt sent a report on his studies and sent information about the university requirements. He said that the program at the university was divided into 3 parts and that the first step consisted of a preliminary program, which lasted 4 years and provided basic education. After this, students could study 4 more years to acquire education at an intermediate level. The next step was the highest level of education, and took 5 years to complete. Overall, study in Al-Azhar University amounted to 9 years and preliminary programs were 4 years. If we compare the students' letters, we may see that this process was similar in other Islamic Universities in Middle East.

Besides that, another madrasa student who studied at Damascus Islamic University in Syria wrote a report to the muftiate that in the Sharia Department the curriculum was spread out over 5 years and for distance learning only 4 years. The student, who studied at the Islamic University of Jordan, wrote that it adhered to an American model according to which students must study 44 subjects in 4 years in the Sharia Department, choosing 6 subjects per semester. Students who also took courses in the summer could complete their studies in as little as 3 years.

Moreover, these letters contain information about the curricula used in these universities. For instance, in 1964–1965, Arabic grammar and syntax, hadith, geography, history of Egypt and Europe, fiqh, logic and English were studied in the preliminary course of study at Al-Azhar University.<sup>46</sup> In the Sharia Department at Al-Qarawayyin University the first course students studied religious subjects as well as the interpretation of the Koran, hadith, tajweed, the "political structure

<sup>44</sup> Recommendation for Abduraimov Pulatjon. TsGARUZ f. P-2456, op.1, d.447, 93.

<sup>45</sup> Islam and the Soviet State (1944–1990): Documents. Vol. 3, op.cit., 80–81.

<sup>46</sup> TsGARUZ f. P-2456, op.1, d.432, 15.



of Islam," the fundamentals of Islamic doctrine, Islamic philosophy, fiqh, French, political economy, history, constitutional law, and other subjects. An Uzbek student, who studied at University of Benghazi in Libya in 1974, sent a report about studying 13 subjects that included the interpretation of the Koran, hadith, Islamic law, new laws, the constitution, English, and other subjects.<sup>47</sup>

Many students highlighted changes in the educational curriculum of the Islamic universities over time where an increasing number of secular subjects were introduced in Islamic universities. Most of them paid attention to secular subjects and used the system of developed countries to organize their educational process.<sup>48</sup> The correspondences also provide information on the students' backgrounds. For example, one student reported that 60 foreign students studied in his program at Al-Azhar University in 1964. Among these, 12 came from Indonesia, 27 from Syria, 3 from Turkey, 4 from Burma, 1 from Japan and 5 from Libya. Another Uzbek student wrote that students from Indonesia, Pakistan, and Iran in 1961 studied at the Sharia department in Syria. However, another student<sup>49</sup> who studied at this university reported that there were rumours to the effect of their possibly being as many as 1500 students studying there. The majority were local Muslim students and apart from that there were also students from Jordan, Indonesia, and Turkey in 1980. In 1982, another student also confirmed this information, and wrote that primarily Syrian students studied in the Sharia department, but that there were 20 African students too. The students were from about 20 to 30 years of age, and they totalled 600 in number. The administration of the university planned to accept students from Europe, the USA, and the Soviet Union. If we compare these numbers to other Islamic universities (for instance, the University of Benghazi) in 1977–1978, Uzbek students reported that among all of the students who studied at the university, 20 came from Asian countries and a much larger number hailed from Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Yet another Uzbek student who studied at Jordan's Islamic University wrote that there were 7000 studying there in 1980. The majority of the students came from the west coast of Jordan and the USSR, and from Malaysia, Taiwan, China, and several other nations. Through these reports we can see the diversity of students studying in foreign universities, and the integration of students into socio-political processes.

Certainly, the Soviet madrasa students made an effort to do the work assigned to them, understanding the requirements of this "instruction." The madrasa students

understood that while studying at foreign Islamic universities, they should never forget the love and loyalty of a Soviet person towards their homeland, and reflect this in their letters. For example, while studying in Damascus, Central Asian students interacted with peers from France, Turkey, Upper Volta, Jordan, Indonesia, and other cities of Syria. They wrote down that they talked about the true life of Muslims in the USSR, about freedom of religion in a socialist state, and that they distributed SADUM's magazine "Muslims of the Soviet East." According to these students, the Damascus Islamic University of Syria administration reported that it would like to accept more students from the Soviet Union. Thus, Soviet students studying at this university's Sharia Faculty apparently could oppose the anti-Soviet propaganda about freedom of religion spread by Western countries.<sup>50</sup>

One example is a report by a student of the Department "Al-Davat al-Islamiya" (Islamic State) in Tripoli, Libya. In this letter the student wrote: "In September 1981, we arrived in Tripoli to continue our studies. On October 1 and October 20, we went to Mecca with other pilgrims. We talked to citizens living in Mecca, Medina, and Jeddah where we met Turkestani émigrés who claimed to have fled the USSR. Most of them were influenced by Western propaganda, and we talked about the real circumstances of the Soviet state, freedom of religion, and the situation of religion. We handed out newspapers to them. The pilgrims listened with interest and asked interesting questions about living in Uzbekistan. We tried to answer them as best as we could."<sup>51</sup>

In another letter, a student describes his interaction with other students in the following way: "From October 21, 1969, until the May 25, 1970, I continued my studies at the Department 'Al-Asiyat al-Din' (Foundations of Religion) at Al-Azhar University. Students from different countries studied there, e.g., North America, Turkey, Madagascar, Sudan, and Afghanistan. I am friends with them: I constantly talk to them about the life of Muslims in the Soviet Union and answer questions about Islam in the USSR, and the life of Soviet people."<sup>52</sup>

In interviews with former students of the madrasa, it becomes clear that they tried to justify their presence abroad by demonstrating their civic loyalty in Soviet style, emphasizing the fact that they followed state instructions, and that this was the only way to remain in the program of studying abroad. Soviet students were well informed that if they did not follow the instructions, they would be excluded from the ranks of the students. Indeed, those who violated the internal regulations were deprived of the opportunity to study abroad. For example, Mufti Z. Babakhanov, in his letter sent to the Tashkent office of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults on November 5, 1962, wrote

<sup>47</sup> TsGARUz f. P-2456, op.1, d.563, 65.

<sup>48</sup> Bassam Tibi. "On modern education, students and social change in the Islamic Middle East", *Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, 13 (3), 1980, 235–241; Paul Kingston. "Reflections on religion, modernization, and violence in the Islamic Middle East", *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 13 (3), 2001, 293–309.

<sup>49</sup> According to the interview results, the respondents (former madrasa students) didn't want their names included.

<sup>50</sup> Official studying reports. Damascus 1978. TsGARUz, f. P-2456, op.1, d.598, 148.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. d.652, 9.

<sup>52</sup> TsGARUz f. P-2456, op.1, d.511, May 1970, 117.

that Soviet students who studied in Syria had left for Aleppo without the permission of the embassy, taken a loan from a Syrian student, unreasonably conducted themselves as extremists, failed to participate in events organized by the embassy, and had made mistakes in their behaviour. He suggested that none of these students be allowed to return to Syria.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the efforts of Soviet students to make a good impression, sometimes Muslim students in Arab countries did not recognize their Soviet peers as faithful Muslims. Indeed, they assumed that the Soviet state was created by an atheistic regime that did not give opportunities to Muslims. Information on this topic was regularly published on the pages of international journals as *Der Spiegel*, *Newsweek* (USA), *La Nouvelle Littéraire* (France), *The Economist*, *Reuter Agency News*, *Heydelsbad* (Holland), *Muslim* (Great Britain), and others. That is partially why Muslim students who came from the Soviet Union were regarded with suspicion. This is reflected in the fact that many of the Soviet Muslim students had a great desire to show their Muslimness. For example, students studying in Jordan offered the following account of how they were received during the Hajj in 1977:

When we learned of a student program facilitating the Hajj, we considered it an appropriate opportunity to showcase our faith. We addressed the Minister of Waqf Affairs, Sheikh Kamal Sharif. The Minister of Waqf, together with other students, included us on the pilgrimage. He added that when the ambassador of Saudi Arabia saw our names and that we are from the Soviet Union, he doubted that we were Muslims and refused. At our request, the Mufti of Jordan, Hashim Abdul, contacted the ambassador by telephone and confirmed that he had visited our country, that there are Muslims living there, and that the students concerned in this case are indeed Muslims. His request was fulfilled and we made a pilgrimage to the cities of Mecca and Medina with the students of the Sharia Faculty from November 18 to December 7. During the Hajj, we tried to demonstrate the proficiency of faithful Muslims through pilgrimage rituals, and the Arab students were convinced that we are true Muslims. Their respect toward us has improved. Even Jordanian citizens expressed good things about us. Our pilgrimage left a good impression among professors and students of the Sharia Faculty.<sup>54</sup>

As mentioned above, some correspondence also mentions the social, economic, and political life of foreign countries. The letters of Soviet students studying in Arab countries also referred to political processes in the country. For example, in 1978–1980 a student at the Islamic University of Jordan wrote the following in his report to SADUM: "Some political parties began to circulate the idea that the Soviet Union is the enemy of all Muslims. They spread negative comments about the actions of the Soviet army in Afghanistan. Many people believe them. Members of the 'Muslim Brotherhood' Party thus incited earnest anger among the people

against the Soviet Union. The same thing was done at the Soviet-sponsored faculty that functioned at the university: With various posters people protested against the Soviet state, trying to provoke the anger of students. Such banners were removed after five to six days. Some people asked us questions about the actions of the Soviet government in Afghanistan."<sup>55</sup>

These Soviet Muslim students established meaningful relationships with ulema abroad and they did not recognize their Soviet peers as faithful Muslims. This analysis seeks to frame Soviet students' experiences in Arab madrasas in a broader sociological and cultural framework that goes beyond the standard narrative of instrumentalization and state politics that has dominated academic analyses of the topic until now. The Soviet madrasa students made an effort to do the work assigned to them, understanding the requirements of this "instruction" to justify themselves by demonstrating their civic loyalty in the Soviet style, emphasizing the fact that they followed the state instruction and this was the only way to remain in the program of studying abroad.

#### Strategies of transcultural relations, students' mobilization and Soviet Muslim networks

Despite the politicization and instrumentalization of the students' overseas studies by both the Soviet government and SADUM, many students appear to have enjoyed something approximating a normal university experience, and fostering this normalcy appears to have been an important goal of the muftiate. SADUM and its counterparts at Arab universities frequently corresponded about issues related to student life and well-being. Letter written by SADUM to university administrators reflect concern about the students' comfort, everyday life and academic performance. For example, the religious administration sent thank you letters to the rector of Al-Azhar University, Abdurrahman Taj, the dean of the Sharia Faculty of the University of Al-Karawayyin, Jawad Al-Skilli, the rector of the University of Al-Qarawayyin, Abdusalom Al-Fassi, and the heads of the Damascus Islamic University and the University of Benghazi in Libya.

In particular, a letter from Mufti Babakhanov to the rector of Al-Azhar on August 26, 1958 states:

Thank you for your attention and sympathy for our four students. They have now returned to spend their summer holidays here. They spend time with their families and most of the time they are reviewing their lessons. They work hard to successfully complete the training and obtain the valuable Al-Azhar certificate under your leadership. I was informed that two of our students were lagging behind in their studies and last year were studying in the third grade of secondary school (sanavia). They explained the reasons for falling behind. It caused me great grief. You were feeling concerned too. I was very confident in them and believed that they were very capable and interested in learning. This is destiny. Please, dear sir, give them more attention and control under your patronage. The Spiritual Administration is waiting for the answer of our letter of

<sup>53</sup> TsGARUz f. P–2456, op.1, d.320, 72–73.

<sup>54</sup> TsGARUz f. P–2456, op.1, d.587, 154.

<sup>55</sup> TsGARUz f. P–2456, op.1, d.625, 7 February 1980, 39–40.

August 13, 1958, when you arrive in Uzbekistan and will delight us. Your visit made us, and all Muslims in the Soviet Union, very pleased. I wish you good luck.<sup>56</sup>

Babakhanov's letter to the rector of Al-Qarawiyyin University, Abdusalom El-Fassi, echoes sentiments of goodwill and collegiality:

I want to inform you that our students are grateful to the ancient Islamic University, which you direct. We believe that the exchange of students with the Muslims of the republics of Central Asia amounts to a kind of fraternal bond. In this regard, on my own behalf and on behalf of the Muslims of our country, I express my sincere gratitude to the professors of Al-Qarawiyyin University. Thank you very much for teaching students from so many Islamic countries. And I wish you good luck in your future life, health, and success in the path of Islam.<sup>57</sup>

The mufti's praises are confirmed by students' correspondence and recollections, which unfailingly emphasize the care, attention, and friendliness of the university leaders and students. They give a strong impression that the students responded to the friendly and warm atmosphere fostered by the university leaders.

These findings lend support to Edward Lazzerini's assertion that Soviet Muslims enjoyed establishing contact with Muslims, cultivating the image of the religious freedom and economic prosperity of Islamic peoples in the USSR, insisting on the historical and fundamental contribution of Soviet Islam to the general culture of the Ummah, and striving to achieve influential positions in international Muslim organizations.<sup>58</sup> Cultural ties with Islamic universities in those years were undeniably successful in some measure, as more than 40 students from 1955 to 1990 had the chance to study at Islamic universities in the Middle East.

One indication of this success is the fact that SADUM received many letters from young people in Asia and Africa requesting admission to the Mir-i Arab Madrasa and the TII. In response to all questions related to Islamic education in Uzbekistan,<sup>59</sup> the religious administration replied that education is conducted only in the Uzbek language and that classes for foreign students are not provided there. In fact, starting in the 1980s, a special decree of the government permitted a small number of students from socialist nations to enrol. With time, students from Afghanistan, Bulgaria, Vietnam, the Na-

tional Democratic Republic of Yemen,<sup>60</sup> and Yugoslavia studied at the TII. These circumstances were created due to the external pressures to establish contact with the "close friends." For example, Afghan students were admitted to Soviet educational institutions in the 1980s in order to justify or excuse the Soviet Union's military actions in Afghanistan.

Political leaders from Arab countries also offered to exchange students with the TII. For example, on September 19, 1973, the supreme mufti of Lebanon (also known as the "Red Mufti") Hassan Khaled agreed that Soviet students would be accepted at Lebanese institutions if room could be made for Lebanese students in the universities of the Soviet Union.<sup>61</sup>

The Soviet Muslim ulema paid close attention to this cultural policy and enjoyed establishing contacts with their Muslim brothers abroad. However, they never forgot the policy of the government. From the other side, Muslim ulema from Islamic universities, understanding this policy, provided this "small help" to their "Muslim brothers" living in the Soviet Union, to preserve and strengthen religion, and to promote Islam.

### Long-term impact: the legacy of Soviet students studying abroad in the Middle East

Islamic legal training of Soviet Muslim students in Middle Eastern countries undeniably contributed to the development of religious personnel with deep knowledge about Islam and the Sharia, proficiency in the use of new methods in madrasa-Islamic education, and even some knowledge of the academic study of Islam, i.e., Orientalism.

In this paper, I argued that Soviet Uzbeks were able to achieve a higher level of Islamic education by utilizing the state policy of sending students abroad. The Soviet state also benefited from sending Muslim students abroad because it strengthened relations with Middle Eastern countries and confronted Western propaganda that maintained that Muslims were oppressed in the Soviet Union. The paper also highlighted the manner in which religious education was entwined with international politics, political propaganda, and the "marketing" of socialism abroad.

The powerful legacy of this exchange can be discerned from the fact that most of these madrasa students continued their activities in SADUM and its post-Soviet successor muftiates, as well as in the field of Oriental studies. For example, a graduate of Al-Azhar University, Ganijon Abdullayev, worked as the deputy head of Administration at Religious Department, and as the editor-in-chief of the magazine *Muslims of the Soviet East*. A student at the Damascus Islamic University in Syria, Mukhtarjan Abdullayev, worked as a teacher and then as the director of the Mir-i Arab Madrasa. Abduqah-

<sup>56</sup> TsGARUz f. P-2456, op.1, d.228, 223.

<sup>57</sup> TsGARUz f. P-2456, op.1, d.432, 125.

<sup>58</sup> Lazzerini E. "Through the Contact Lens Darkly: Soviet Muslims and their foreign co-religionists. 1926-86", in *Political and Economic Trends in Central Asia*, ed. by Shirin Akiner. British Academic Press, 1994), 156.

<sup>59</sup> For instance, we found such letters sent from GanaNuhu Mahammad and Sulayman Ismail, Abdusami ibn al-Matu and Abu Bakr Mubir Zaidi from Nigeria, Hamid A.Karim from Shri Lanka, Musa Muhammad and ar-Rashid Amin from Sudan, Samari Abdulloh from Tanzaniya and more Muslim youth inquired about studying in Uzbekistan.

<sup>60</sup> TsGARUz f. P-2456, op.1, d.733, 3-68.

<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, there had been invitations to study at secular universities. For example on February 10, 1957, a member of the Defenders of Peace in the World in Damascus, Syria, Muhammad al-Ashmar, sent an inquiry stating that his relatives would like to study economy, politics, and medicine at the university. TsGARUz f. P-2456, op.1, d.213, 76.

hor Gaffarov, who graduated from Al-Azhar University, was the director of the Mir-i Arab Madrasa, and later worked as the head of the TII. Two students of the University of Benghazi in Libya, Salokhiddin Mukhitdinov and Mohammed Sadyk Muhammad Yusuf worked as rectors of the TII while the latter became SADUM's last mufti. Abdulaziz Mansurov, a graduate of Sudan University at Omdurmon, is currently the deputy chairman of the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan. Other students from Central Asian republics, such as Ratbek Nisanbayev (Kazakhstan), Temurbay Orunbayev (Kyrgyzstan), and H. Egamberdiev (Tajikistan), continue to play a prominent role in the official religious establishments in their countries.

Studying abroad allowed students to expand their horizons and their knowledge in the field of religious studies, and to use this experience in their future work. In this sense, they can be considered as modernized personnel, not only in the religious sphere but also in secular society. Having studied abroad these students gained a type of quasi-secular legitimacy as per the Soviet worldview, in addition to their new religious knowledge.

The increase in religious qualifications speaks for itself. Numerous ulema who studied abroad became prominent Orientalists and Islamic scholars upon their return. For instance, Yusufkhan Shakirov, who graduated from the literary department of Al-Azhar University in 1961 under the patronage of SADUM, worked as head of the Department of International Relations of SADUM and as an employee of the Institute of Oriental Studies named after Beruni. He defended his doctorate dissertation in Arabic philology in Al-Azhar University, Egypt. Another graduate of the University of Tripoli, Libya, Muhammad Sadyk Mohammed Yusuf, published more than 50 books and articles on various aspects of religion while director of the TII and as mufti from 1989–1993.

In addition, modern changes to the education system in the Middle East were used by graduate students in Islamic educational institutions of Uzbekistan. In other words, the use of foreign experience in teaching secular subjects, the teaching of foreign languages, using new methods on religious subjects, had a positive impact on the quality and structure of the teaching system. In the system of religious education, recommendations and requirements were made on the issues that needed to be taken to improve the efficiency of the students' educational process.

In particular, they expressed their opinion on the introduction of new sciences, on the teaching of calligraphy, and on the improvement of the Arabic language. These results became prominent in the 1970s and the early 1990s, and contributed to the improvement of the quality of education in the Mir-i Arab Madrasa and the TII.

Moreover, Central Asian Muslim scholars used this policy to communicate with and establish contacts with foreign *ulema* through which the state achieved some benefits. For example, with the organization of international conferences, there was tacit support for

Islam from the Soviet state. Religious leaders used this support to increase the number of pilgrims who could make the annual Hajj, to increase the number of students permitted to study in the Mir-i Arab Madrasa and the TII, and to restore and renovate the sacred sites under SADUM's control. This outcome suggests

**Dr. Zilola Khalilova** is a Junior Research fellow at the Al-Beruni Institute of Oriental Studies in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. She finished a PhD thesis on Islamic education in Soviet Uzbekistan at the Institute of History, Uzbekistan in 2019. Her research interest focus on the history of education, Islamic pedagogy, reading primers and textbooks, social life of Soviet Muslims, and the Islamic education of women. (zilola\_kesh@mail.ru.)

The ZMO Working Papers is a series of publications that document and reflect developments and discussions within ZMO research projects. Texts are usually empirically based and regionally focused and may also represent outcomes of research at an early stage. They are published on the ZMO website.

The Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) is the only German research institute devoted to an interdisciplinary and comparative study of the Middle East, Africa, South, Southeast and Central Asia from a historical perspective. Current research focuses on the interaction between predominantly Muslim societies and their relations with non-Muslim neighbours. ZMO was founded in 1996 as one of six university-independent, non-profit research centres for research in the humanities. Since 2017 it is a member of the Leibniz Association.

ISSN 2191-3897  
© ZMO 2021

This text may be downloaded only for personal research purposes. Additional reproduction for other purposes, whether in hard copies or electronically, requires the consent of the author(s), editor(s). If cited or quoted, reference should be made to full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title of the programmatic text, the year and the publisher. For questions and comments please contact ZMO.